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## LOCAL

# Builder, priest, accused embezzler: Who is the Rev. Jonathan Wehrle?

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Jane Gottschalk looked at dozens of houses before she and her husband settled on a Gambrel Colonial in Okemos.

The home's hardwood floors, crown molding, geothermal heat and location in "rural suburbia" were some of its main selling points.

"I saw fancier houses, but this house was fine," Gottschalk said. "He staged it right."

That was 27 years ago.

Long before the home's previous owner and general contractor, the Rev. Jonathan Wehrle, began appearing in headlines and civil court hearings.

Before the 67-year-old priest was charged with embezzlement.

Before auditors dug deeper and discovered what they believed to be more than \$5 million missing from his Okemos parish.

Back then, Gottschalk knew the towering priest as a thoughtful contractor and home builder who always answered her calls.

"We never had one moment of trouble with him," Gottschalk said, from her perch within the Okemos home. "He sold it beautifully."

Like Gottschalk, transcripts, court records and archived media coverage speak of Wehrle's long history of home and church construction — a calling that came under scrutiny when officials alleged in May that Wehrle used more than \$5 million in church funds on his most recent project.

Wehrle, now retired, was bound over to circuit court Friday on six counts of embezzlement of \$100,000 or more. His lawyer has argued the priest had family money and an agreement with a bishop who passed away in 2003 regarding use of church money for a rectory.

A woman who answered Wehrle's phone Monday said he could not comment for this story. He's declined comment since his arraignment in May.

But his comments to media at the beginning of his Lansing-area tenure speak across the years.

"I can't believe how much interest everything I do generates," Wehrle told the State Journal in 1989.

Builder. Dreamer. Designer. A 6-foot, 5-inch priest who "thinks as big as he looks."

Those are the descriptors sprinkled through State Journal articles about Wehrle between the late '80s and early '90s as he began construction on St. Martha Parish.

His construction of the church on the site of a former pornographic drive-in movie theater, the building of a 6,000-square-foot Meridian Township home around the same time, and church renovations since have landed Wehrle in the headlines intermittently.

But years before he came to Lansing, Wehrle was a kid learning the trade from his father, an electrical contractor in Adrian.

"I grew up pulling wire and drilling holes to wire houses," Wehrle said in a 2008 deposition for a civil case concerning a payment dispute for the construction of his Williamston home.

Wehrle's electrical knowledge would grow to encompass more of the home building process, mirroring his father's, according to his 2008 deposition.

In 15 years, the Wehrle family lived in 12 different homes. Wehrle said his father would snap up the odd lot in a subdivision or a parcel on a hill that no one could identify a use for. He would “build and sell, build and sell.”

“And I have invested (in) a number of properties over the years and the way my dad taught me, it’s been pretty successful,” Wehrle said.

Wehrle started college at Tri-State University in Indiana before finishing his bachelor’s in business administration at Aquinas College in Grand Rapids.

In 1977, he graduated from St. John’s Seminary in Plymouth with a master's degree in theology.

He was ordained in 1978, according to transcripts, and spent the next 10 years at parishes that included St. Mary Star of the Sea in Jackson, Holy Redeemer in Burton, and Sacred Heart in Hudson.

He was a licensed foster care parent in Michigan from 1983 to 2003, according to the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. A state spokesman said he was unable to provide information as to how many children Wehrle fostered, but Wehrle himself has said he raised three adopted sons.

In 1988, the late Bishop Kenneth Povish asked Wehrle to start St. Martha Parish. Wehrle would spend nearly three decades at the Okemos church.

“I was actively involved in a church renovation and construction at Sacred Heart in Hudson,” Wehrle said in his 2008 deposition. “I think it was the quality of that job that the bishop asked me to come and build a new church.”

As the Lansing area's population shifted east in the '70s and '80s, Catholics settling in Okemos and Meridian Township needed a parish closer than those in Williamston or East Lansing.

Wehrle would be brought in to build one, the diocese told the State Journal in May 1988.

“Father Jonathan Wehrle’s huge frame fairly bursts with enthusiasm for his job — establishing a Catholic parish in the Okemos area where none existed before,” State Journal Reporter Helen Clegg wrote in July 1988.

He celebrated the parish's first Mass on July 3, 1988 at the Okemos High School Auditorium. More than 500 people attended and the collection amounted to more than \$2,000, he told the State Journal.

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Wehrle armed himself with a map of Lansing and scrounged up an altar, a cross, candlesticks, parish registration card, offertory envelopes, and bulletins.

All he was missing was a building site.

He'd soon find one at the Crest Drive-In Theatre, which had shown pornographic movies at its 18-acre site along Grand River Avenue since 1970.

The property's use as a theater site dated back to 1950, when first-run movies were shown there. The drive-in debuted X-rated movies in 1970, was raided twice by sheriff's deputies in 1973, and battled the township and county prosecutors over free speech rights in the mid-70s.

The 1988 sale of the property to the diocese may not be a miracle, a State Journal reporter wrote, but neighbors called it a godsend.

"It strikes me this property is in need of redemption, and I am hoping our presence will be of a redeeming nature both spiritually and socially," Wehrle told the State Journal.

Nearby residents largely were relieved by the new neighbors, but others involved in a "slow-growth movement" thought the church's presence would accelerate the urban sprawl from East Lansing. There was also concern about the strain the church would put on the water and sewer systems.

But Wehrle's passion carried the plans through objections, complications and municipal approvals.

With experts from Michigan State University and the State Employees Credit Union on his building committee, Wehrle began construction in 1990 on the 45,000-square-foot, \$2.8 million complex that would house the church and school.

The church incorporated chandeliers and stained glass from St. Lawrence Hospital in Lansing; altars, statues and pews from St. Vincent Home in Lansing, and three bronze bells from St. Francis Seminary in Loretta, Pennsylvania weighing between 1,800 and 4,700 pounds.

On Palm Sunday in March 1991, Wehrle celebrated his first Mass at the completed church with about 1,500 people in attendance.

The school, which would open in 1993, started with nine classrooms and a two-story religious education wing, according to State Journal reports.

Renovations and additions to the church and school have taken place over the years, with one of the more recent campaigns in 2013 aiming for \$5 million for a gymnasium, library, classrooms, parish hall and locker rooms.

While plans for St. Martha's were still in their infancy, Wehrle set his sites on a smaller build — a house to call home.

Wehrle's first home in the Lansing area was the seventh to bear his seal of construction.

Wehrle built a 6,000-square-foot home on Van Atta Road — the same he would eventually sell to Jane Gottschalk — as a trial run, “to get to know the contractors and the way things work in Meridian Township before attempting to build a church,” according to a February 1989 LSJ article.

The home at that time included four and a half bathrooms, a large kitchen with two ovens and two microwave ovens and all of the details that eventually would sell Gottschalk on the property — the hardwood floors, church windows, built-in bookshelves.

The parcel on which the home was built was sold to Wehrle for \$17,725 by the Diocese of Lansing in 1988, according to property records. Wehrle told the State Journal he paid for the home's construction with money from real estate investments.

“It is the seventh home I've built,” Wehrle told the State Journal. “I took the best ideas from each. This is the dream home.”

Wehrle acted as the general contractor for most of those homes, he would later say at his 2008 deposition.

The Van Atta Road house would go back on the market for \$498,500 about a year after it was built, and sell for \$370,000, according to property records.

At the time, Wehrle told the State Journal the home was too big for him. He said rumors that the bishop told him to sell the property were untrue.

“In fact, the bishop was very complimentary on my decorating,” Wehrle told the LSJ.

Over the years, Wehrle’s name has also appeared on property records for at least four homes on Noble Road, at least two homes on Holt Road, and another on Stagecoach Drive. His mother’s home in Jackson County, for which Wehrle was named as an owner, was sold in March for \$700,000. The home has been mentioned in court hearings as another alleged recipient of St. Martha funds.

Property records indicate that shortly after Wehrle sold the Van Atta Road home in 1990, he purchased property at 1475 Noble Road. The property, according to assessing records, includes a 3,600-square-foot home, a 3,400-square-foot barn and 1,000-square-foot utility building.

Wehrle sold that home for \$475,000 in 2004 as he started designing an 11,000-square-foot home down the street, a home that would land him in headlines a decade later.

Wehrle was returning from Mass on a Sunday in 2000, when he saw a "for sale" sign for an old 1870s farm house at 1400 Noble Road. He pulled into the driveway.

“It was the first time in 12 years that I had seen the lay of the land,” Wehrle said in a 2008 deposition. “There’s a gorgeous, beautiful large pond on this property. And as I stood on the property and looked around I said what a beautiful building site.”

He purchased the property and moved into the old farmhouse four years later. He broke ground on his future home in April 2005.

In explaining the home's scale during the 2008 deposition, Wehrle said he needed a structure that could support three pipe organs he'd purchased from Grand Rapids, New York and California.

"The house had to be well enough constructed to support this instrument," Wehrle said. "As a result of designing the room for the pipe organ, then there was a need to put the rest of the house in balance for this large living room."

He also had plans to make the site a bed and breakfast.

Assessment records and photos taken when police searched the home in May give an idea of its scale.

The two-story, 11,345-square-foot structure includes six bedrooms, four basement rooms, 12 bathrooms, 10 fireplaces, and three barns ranging from 1,792 to 2,304 square feet, according to assessing records.

Property taxes on the home in 2016 amounted to more than \$25,000.

"...These projects were conceived in my dreams laying awake at night," Wehrle said at his 2008 deposition. "And I'm the one who gave sketches, whether it was to the architect of the church or the various houses, including this one, I was very familiar with what was supposed to be where, what I intended, what I wanted."

Photos and testimony in court so far detail limestone fireplaces, an elevator, multiple flat screen televisions, grand pianos, the pipe organs, a pool and hot tub, stained glass windows, and an elevated walkway connecting the home's back deck to one of the barns.

"This is pretty fancy stuff," Ingham County District Judge Donald Allen said as he reviewed the photos during a court hearing in October.

Jim Belles, a longtime neighbor of Wehrle, said most of the neighborhood wondered how a priest could afford a home like the one at 1400 Noble Road.

In May, Belles contemplated that question again when he saw two police cars travel down Noble Road and turn into Wehrle's home. They were there most of the day.

“I knew it was something big,” Belles said. “Of course, by that time it was already starting to come out in the news.”

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